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ABSTRACT

This study examines the emergence of aesthetic sensitivity in the young child as a maker of art and as a critic of the work of peers. Two studies were designed to explore the child's own, mostly implicit, assumptions about child art, sensitivity to stylistic and drawing system differences, and to compositional patterns that characterize the work of younger and older children. The first study examined kindergarten children's spontaneous productions; the extent to which certain media, such as paints, brushes, magic markers, pencils, or crayons are preferred modes for either abstract or representational drawings and paintings; and reasons for such preferences. The second study examined elementary school students' aesthetic judgment of peers' art works that were to some extent similar to the children's own work. The study explored the child's conception of child art, and elicited accepting and rejecting responses to typical childhood productions, in an attempt to establish criteria the child used for judging his or her own work. (RH)

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A Study of Young Children's Aesthetic Sensitivity to Drawing and Painting

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A Study of Young Children's Aesthetic Sensitivity to Drawing and Painting

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With few exceptions, the child's aesthetic sensitivity to drawings and paintings has been studied with samples drawn from adult art. Likewise, the criteria for judging the child's sensitivity to works of art have been derived from a mature aesthetic sensitivity with which children's responses are then compared. A most glaring omission in the study of children's aesthetic responsiveness is the absence of information regarding their attitude toward their own work. We do not know what they think and feel about their own drawings and paintings, how they regard their abstract and representational work, whether they are sensitive to the qualities of line, shape, color, texture, size and compositional pattern that characterize their products and that of their peers. The problem of the aesthetic criteria that guide the child's work and determine his or her judgment of the work of others needs to be addressed.

The following studies explore the child's response to his work and to that of his peers from the child's perspective rather than from adult aesthetic theory, and without the a priori assumption that cognitive decentering is the major mechanism for the development of aesthetic sensitivity in the child. More specifically, the studies, which are merely exploratory in nature, are designed (a) to elicit the child's evaluation of his

own work made in different media, and varying in content and style, and (b) to elicit his judgment of the work of his peers, some older, some younger, with specific emphasis on the compositional strategies used.

Study 1

This study examines the child's spontaneously produced art work and the extent to which media such as paint, brushes, magic markers, pencils or crayons are used in selective ways. An integral part of the study is the intent to elicit the child's comments on his own work, to facilitate the articulation of his, normally, implicit assumptions about media and art, to probe his motivation for making abstract or representational drawings and paintings, and to explore early signs of an awareness of qualities of line, shape and color.

Methods

Subjects

The participants were 30 children enrolled in two public school kindergarten classes. The children, ages 4.10 to 6.4 years, came from a middle-class background.

Materials and Procedures

All children had access to a variety of materials including paints, brushes, magic markers, crayons, chalk, felt-tipped markers, and standard size 9" X 12" white construction paper. The art work was produced during the "free" hour, when children in this grade can select their activity.

The study was conducted in three phases. First, the child's spontaneous choice of medium (paint and brushes versus markers or

crayons) as well as content (representational versus abstract) was noted; next, the child was asked to produce a work in the missing mode, either working with paints or crayons/markers. Thus, for each subject in this study, we collected a set of drawings and paintings that used at least two different sorts of implements. During both phases, the experimenter took notes on the child's behavior and verbalizations. Finally, each child was seen individually by the experimenter, and an inquiry was conducted that probed his thoughts and feelings about the activity, the medium, and the mode of representation. This interview was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results

When we classify the art work into representational and abstract categories, it immediately becomes apparent that, by and large, paints and brushes yield non-representational work, while crayons, markers and chalk yield representational drawings. To be precise, 77% of the paintings were abstracts, while 91% of the drawings were representational. In terms of "spontaneous" choices, almost all the children preferred the painting medium over the markers and crayons. As might be expected, the use of paints led to a great deal of experimentation in terms of mixing of colors and placement of marks on the paper. With this medium, all the available colors were used. In contrast, markers and crayons were used more selectively, in a more deliberate and planned fashion, with no attempt at mixing or overlay of colors. While the great majority of paintings was completed in less than 3 minutes, the majority of the drawings exceeded that time period. In terms of the use of space, the abstract paintings used

the total available space, a relatively infrequent occurrence for representational drawings which, in equal proportions, utilized the center portion of the page or the lower half of the paper. Since in this study, the use of implements is highly correlated with the mode of drawing or painting, use of space differed as a function of using paints or markers.

Use of shape was a central concern in representational work, but played a lesser role in paintings where children used broad strokes, filling the paper with color, creating color fields, or at times shapes that were promptly colored in. Color effects seemed to dominate over the desire to create shapes. Even when linear elements were used, the greater freedom or lack of restraint with paints led to less distinctive lines and shapes, and this was the case when large as well as small brushes were used. By contrast, with markers and crayons, lines were closed, forms planned, and their placement quite intentional.

Our inquiry reveals that the most attractive activity for these kindergarteners is indeed painting, and to the question if given the opportunity to make another picture , what would they prefer, the nearly unanimous answer was "painting." This is consistent with their spontaneously made first choice , which indicates a clear preference for the painting medium over crayons and markers. There were many expressions of delight and pleasure in using paints. In the words of some children: " Can't you tell, I just <u>love</u> to experiment with colors", and upon the completion and inspection of their work, expressions of appreciation: "O' look! I made a beautiful peach color, right there in the middle;"

"Oh' are'nt those colors beautiful, I love the way they go together", "...the colors sort of got all new" . Inspection might also lead to a negative evaluation: "Don't you just hate brown," or "Yuck, I shouldn't have mixed those all together, now it's all yucky!"

In response to a question , children usually expressed satisfaction with their work, regardless of the medium employed. Each medium served a different purpose, one for making something "real" the other for creating color field mixtures. The idea of changing something seemed quite foreign to the children, and most showed surprise when questioned about such a possibility. In response to the question "Is there anything you could do to make it better", only 5 out of the 30 children that comprised our sample suggested that, perhaps, they could add something to a representational drawing, and 8 suggested changes in terms of fixing a drippy area or eliminating a color they did not like in their painting.

The question that asked what a child liked about his work, revealed that children related selectively to paint and to markers. In the case of markers, children stated that they liked them because you could make things that looked "real", which was the purpose of a drawing. Similar responses were recorded to questions about the shapes they had used. The answer was that they looked "real". In regard to painting, however, paint was chosen because it was "smooth" or "slippery" or all "mixy." Children's responses indicated a sensuous pleasure in the use of paint and its properties, often expressed in kinesthetic terms. Pen, marker, and crayon were enjoyed because they made "good,

fast, and tight lines," or" they went where I wanted a line."

Overall, the responses, made either spontaneously or to our questions, indicate quite clearly, that our children differentiated between the media, the uses to which they could or should be put, and that they evaluated their work and their satisfaction accordingly. Their criteria for making representational or abstract works varied sharply, and their appreciation of the different implements was quite distinct, depending on what one could do with each one of them. There was evident pleasure in the control of pen and marker, with special attention paid to the function of line, namely, that it can be jaggedy, smooth or curvy, fast and tight. In the case of painting, the pleasure was of a more sensuous nature and in the spirit of an adventure.

Taken together, the results suggest that these kindergarteners showed sensitivity to the properties of the medium, a sensuous and perception-based aesthetic response that is quite independent of symbolic-cognitive activity. They derived very different sorts of satisfaction from their representational and non-representational work, and their preferences depended on what they wished to do with the media.

Study 2

In the next study, we examine the child's judgment of art works produced by children, and thus of drawings that are to some extent similar to the subjects own work, either in terms of drawings which the child has made earlier, is currently making, or may make in the near future. We wish to explore the child's

conception of child art, to ascertain what his criteria for judging his own work are, and to sample his likes and dislikes of typical examples of children's drawings.

Methods

Subjects

Our participants were 56 public school children enrolled in kindergarten, first, and second grades. The school was located in an upper- middle class community.

Materials

Five sets of drawings were constructed, two on the theme of the family, and one each on themes of a birthday party, a boat on a lake, and a village. Each set comprised four drawings that varied in terms of figural differentiation and compositional characteristics, and were quite "typical" of the drawings made by 4 to 5, 6 to 7, 8 to 9,and 10 to 11 year olds. The drawings of the family and the birthday party were derived from a large collection of children's drawings, the work of 4 to 13 year olds. These drawings are direct copies of child art, closely imitating the style, drawing system, figural differentiation and compositional arrangement of the originals. The remaining two sets (boat and village) were designed by the authors and they exhibit similar figural and spatial principles. Within each set, an effort was made to keep the number of items and color use constant. The family theme comprised two sets of four drawings each. Except for the introduction of colored patches in one of the sets, the two sets were identical in all other respects. Color was introduced in order to assess its potential effect on the child's judgment. (See slides 1-5). All drawings were made on

standard size paper, 8 1/2" x 11", and covered with a protective, transparent plastic sheet.

Procedure

In individual sessions, each child was presented with one set at a time. The order of presentation , both within sets and between sets, was randomized. A series of relatively open-ended questions probed the child's judgment about the age and skill of the artist, subject matter, preferences, and judgments on what constitutes a good picture. Examples are: What do you think about these? What do you think they are about? How are they alike? How are they different? Who do you think made them? How old were the people who made them? Which do you like best? Can you tell me why? Are there some you don't like? Can you tell me why? Which is most like what you draw? Which is the best picture of all?

Results

Two sets of questions yielded consistent responses from all subjects, independent of age . Nearly all children preferred the picture drawn by the oldest child, and most children chose it as the best picture. Interestingly, most children also overestimated the similarity of their own work to that of the preferred drawing, seemingly underestimating the difficulty in attaining the figural and compositional complexity depicted in these drawings. Thus we see that even kindergarteners can assess , quite correctly, level of representation, while underestimating their own limitations, a finding that held for the total sample.

The question concerning drawings the child might dislike,

elicited few critical responses. Mostly, the drawings were identified by age , and considered adequate for the children producing it. The work was always identified as the product of children, and quite accurately identified as made by older or younger children. Interestingly, while these youngsters were generally reluctant to criticize the drawings, their response to the question " how pictures are alike and how they are different" indicated their ability to make competent discriminations, and revealed their reliance on certain aesthetic principles. This was the case even for the kindergarteners. The children now noted the faulty orientation of figures or objects, commenting: "they are all tippy," or " the houses are all falling down", and criticized the undifferentiated size of the family members. Apparently, by their standards, size differentiation is important for the theme of family, an indication that these youngsters are not only sensitive to figural differentiation but also to compositional arrangements. Most children, independent of grade level, noticed when a picture was richer and more varied in its detail, and commented favorably on the most complex compositional arrangement that gave the clearest indication of the meaning of the event. While the colored family picture set was generally liked, the responses were identical to the standard set.

A difference that distinguishes the attitude of the younger from the older children appeared in the more personal self-referential associations of the kindergarteners. Typical comments included such statements as: "I could make one like this," or "it reminds me of my birthday." The older children are more apt to mention "objective" criteria like detail, realism,

etc. They also show an awareness of some of the pictorial depth cues, and a more critical orientation vis a vis the early and undifferentiated levels of representation.

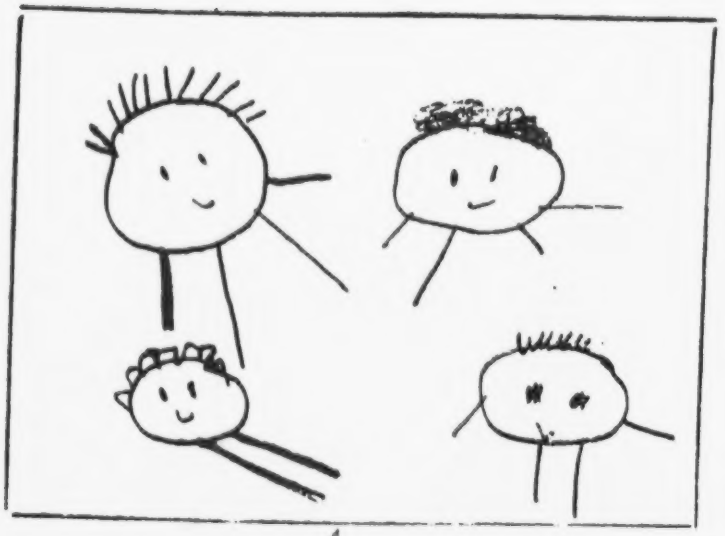
In summary, we can conclude that even the kindergarteners possessed the ability to apply emerging aesthetic standards to the work of others. These standards apply to the differentiation of figures, to their orientation, and compositional arrangement. Their accurate identification of the ages of the artists indicates that they are aware of the developmental aspects of the artistic endeavor, and that they make allowances for the age and experience of the artist. These youngsters are quite able to "read" the subject matter, even when the compositional arrangement is quite primitive, no doubt helped by the more advanced pictures in this array.

The results of our two studies indicate that young children are not only producers of art, but that they are also able to appreciate their work and that of their peers. Their aesthetic sensibilities are not limited to a conceptual assessment of figural differentiation, but includes a responsiveness to qualities of color, line, and shape, and an emerging sense of the dynamics of form.

Finally, a critical comment about the limitations of our second study is called for. The controls which we imposed on our materials by using only uniform themes, standard sizes, pictures lacking in true color and textural cues, inevitably tended to restrict the potential responses. While such stimulus material, with its imposed uniformity, provides important controls, it also

constrains the response and thus introduces biases. A second criticism concerns our confounding of figural differentiation with increased compositional complexity, a limitation we are trying to overcome in the next study we are planning to conduct.

Figure 1



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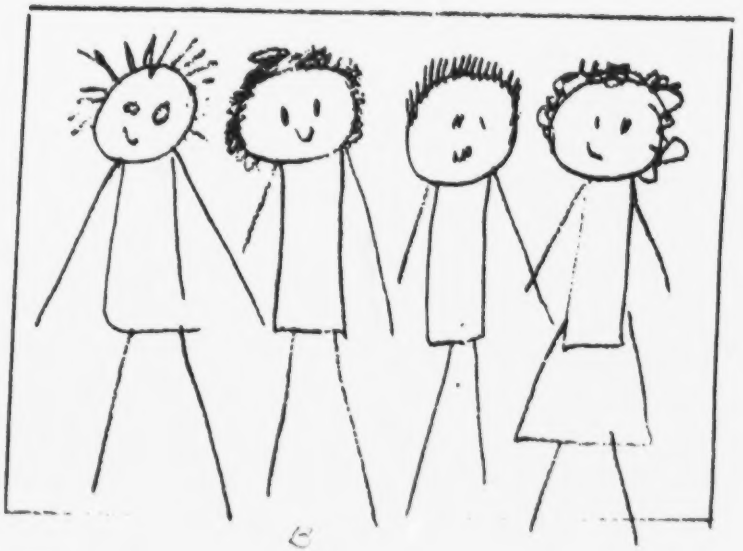

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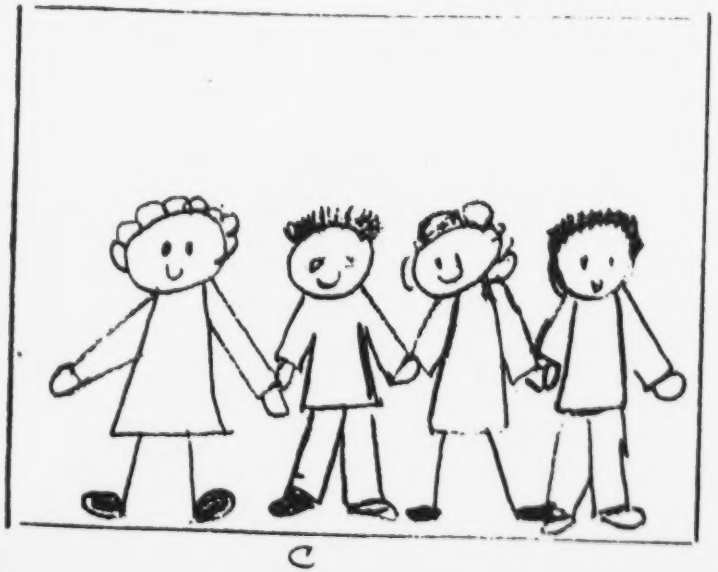

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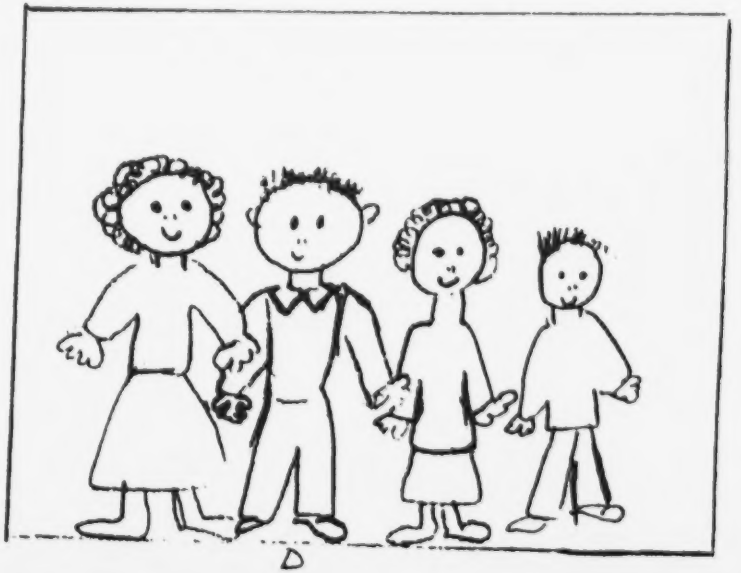

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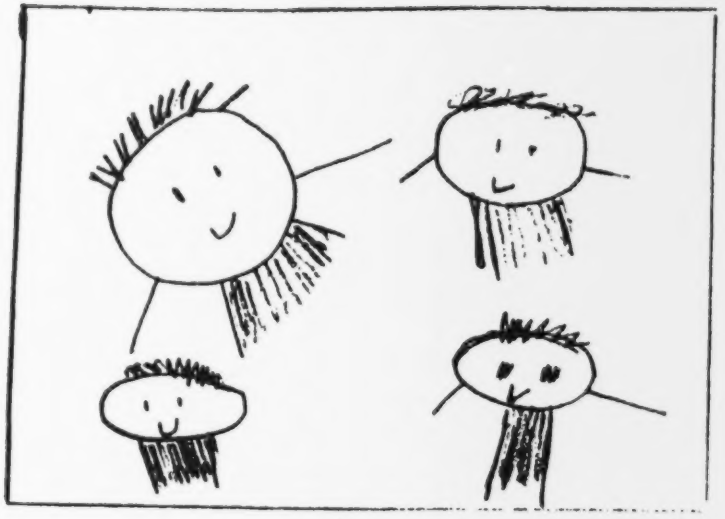
Figure 2



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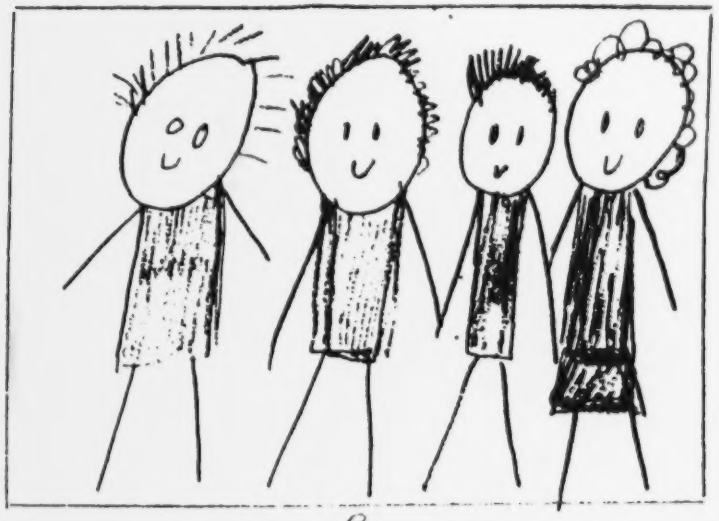

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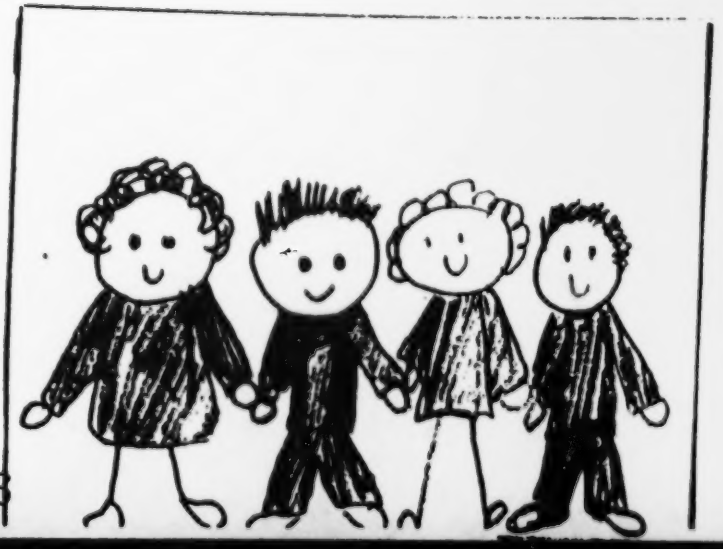


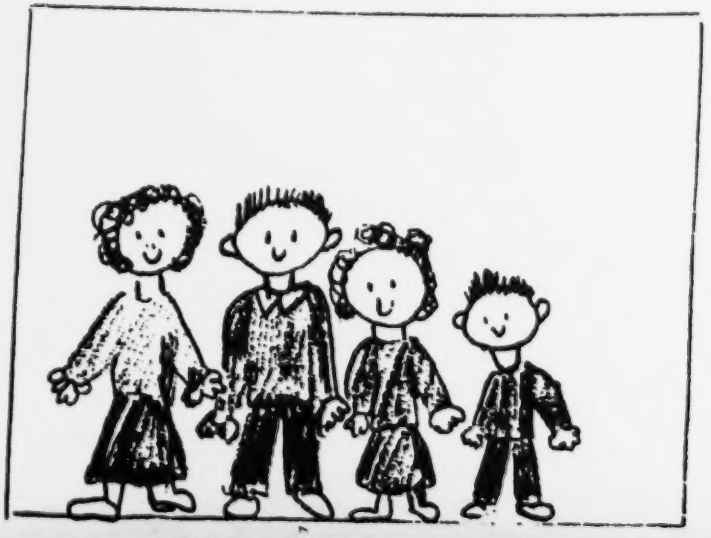
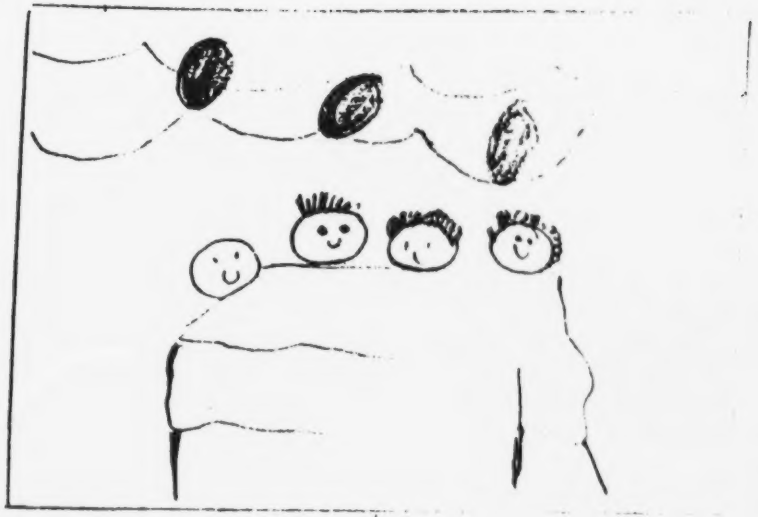


Figure 3



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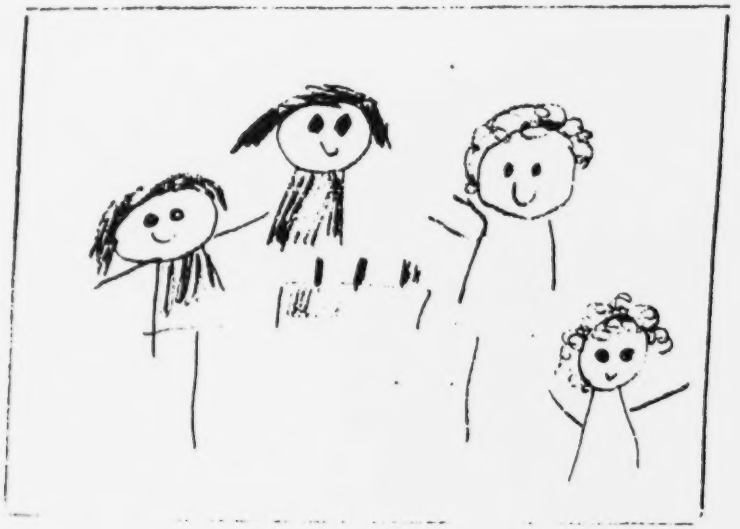

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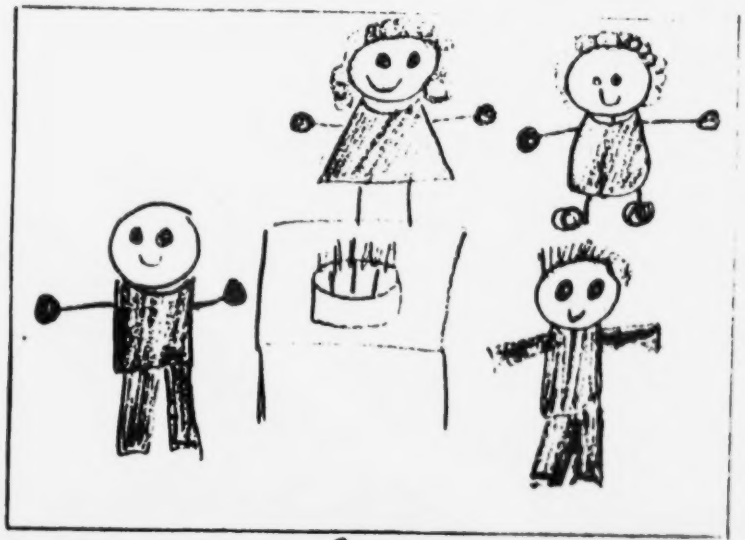

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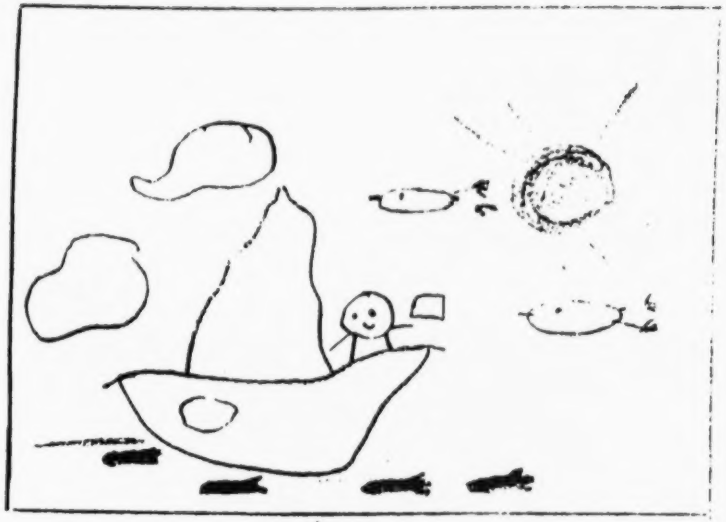
Figure 4



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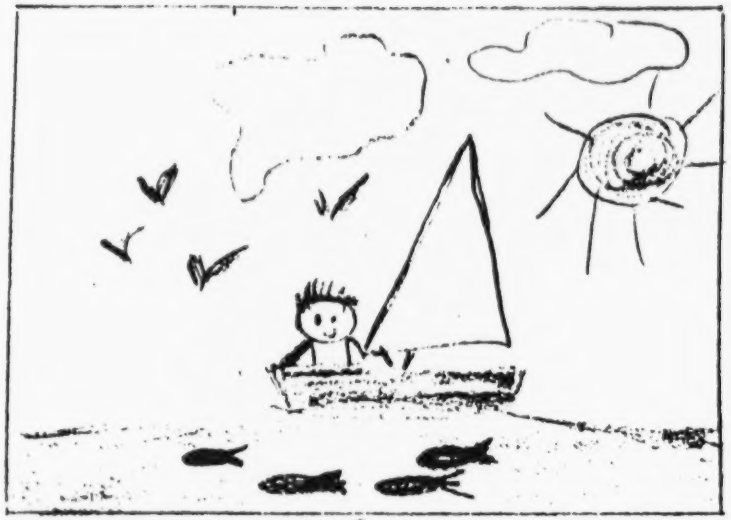

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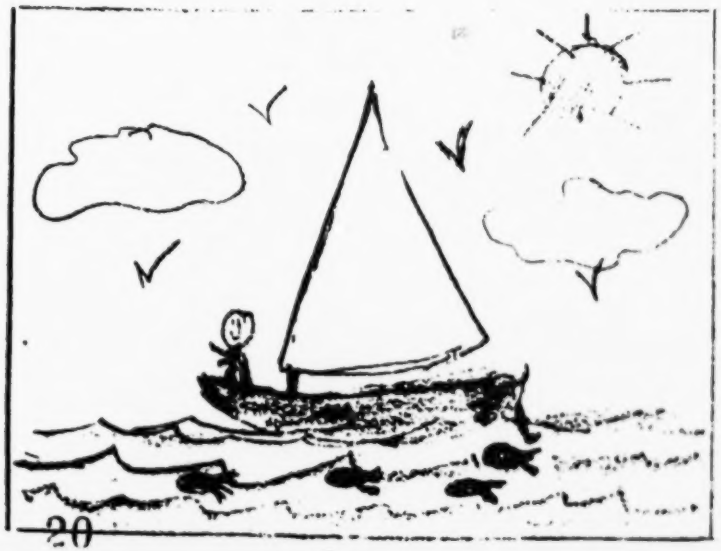

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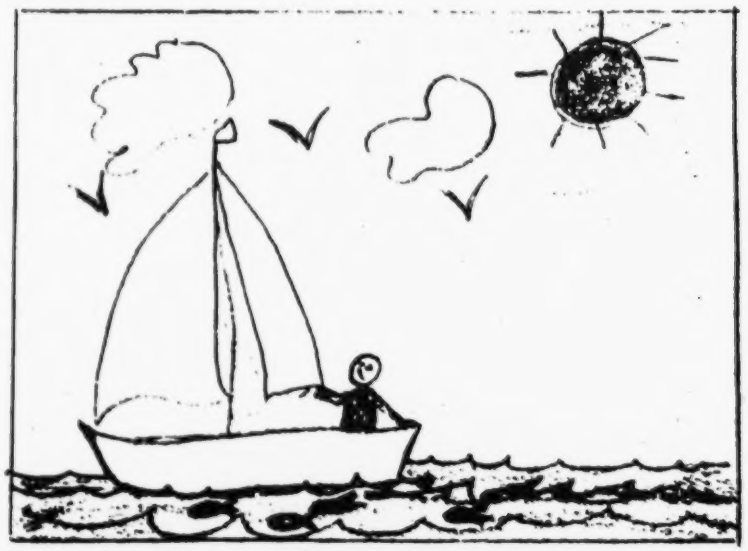

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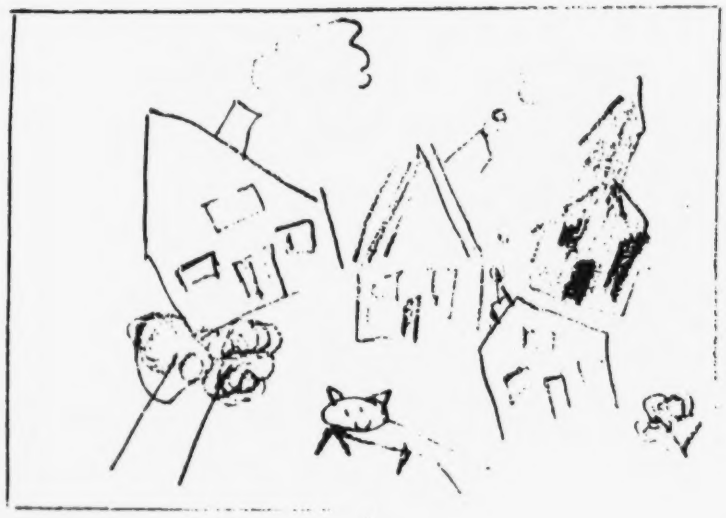
Figure 5



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